FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
June 3, 2001

"Listen"
John M. Buchanan

"The Spirit can work in you with a soft but insistent voice. The Spirit can work in you, awakening the desire to strive toward the sublime over against the profanity of the average day. The Spirit can give you courage which says 'yes' to life in spite of the destructiveness you have experienced."

Paul Tillich

FOURTH
PRESBY
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CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Acts 2: 1-13
" . . . how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?" (Acts 2:8)

Dear God, we have come here today in the trust that you have something to say to us. So we pray for the ability to listen and to hear. Silence in us any voice but your own, and startle us again with your truth and your love. In Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

James Forbes, one of the truly eloquent and powerful preachers of our generation, suggests that most mainline Protestants are uncomfortable with the very idea of the Holy Spirit. Forbes came out of the Pentecostal tradition which, as you know, takes its name from the event the church remembers on this day—Pentecost, with its sound of a rushing wind and fire and its speaking in many tongues. The Pentecostal movement, which, by the way, is the fastest growing part of the Christian Church anywhere in the world—particularly in South America and Africa, emphasizes the presence and gifts of the Holy Spirit in its life and mission and particularly its worship. Sometimes characterized by a high emotionalism, worshippers express the presence of the Spirit enthusiastically, extravagantly and vocally, not unlike that first Pentecost experience. And sometimes the presence of the Spirit is so palpable that worshippers "speak in tongues," a practice known as glossalalia—all of which makes Presbyterians very nervous.

We are the orderly branch of Christianity. Pentecostals are puzzled by the fact that our worship is so structured, we can write out the sequence, even write the prayers, print it up, hand it out, call it the "Order of Worship," and dare anyone to deviate. Presbyterians have a constitution, after all, one half of which is called the Book of Order. We do things "decently and in order" we like to say. And our Pentecostal friends think that we have pretty much insulated ourselves from the Holy Spirit—which reminds me of the story I tell every year on this Sunday because it is a perfect Presbyterian Pentecost story.

A woman wandered into a Presbyterian Church on Sunday morning; sat down in the pew and joined in the service, which was already underway. Everything went according to the prescribed order: hymns, prayers, readings. When the minister stood up in the pulpit and began to preach, however, the woman became suddenly very animated—and vocally responsive. "Yes," she said out loud, when she heard him make a point she liked. "Yes, that's true." "Praise the Lord—praise his Holy name," she said a few minutes later—and louder. People began to shuffle and squirm uneasily; some turned around in their pews to see who was doing this extraordinary thing. "Amen," she shouted—and an usher, discreetly, of course, approached her and whispered, "Ma'am is there something wrong?"

"Why no," she said, "I've got the spirit!" Whereupon he said, "Well, you didn't get it here."

Jim Forbes, Pentecostal by birth and nurture, sophisticated intellectually and theologically, and the preaching minister at New York's Riverside Church, says that mainline Protestants are repelled by the term Holy Spirit—at the same time they are obsessed with something popularly called spirituality. Holy Spirit sounds like a cult. Spirituality sounds fashionable.

Martin Marty explores the issue of the sudden popularity of "spirituality" in a recent issue of *Context*. Celebrities talk about spirituality and use the word "spiritual" a lot.

"Jennifer Lopez told *Allure Magazine,* 'I have lots of spiritual books around. I don't even know the titles . . .At the end of the day, it's all about being, like, a good person—centered, focused, and at peace.'" (*Context,* 6/01/01; *New York Times,* 1/23/01)

I don't mean to pick on Jennifer Lopez, who I'm glad is centered, focused, at peace and, like, a good person, but what the Christian faith means by Spirit, Holy Spirit, the gifts or work or signs of the Spirit's presence, in a, therefore, spiritual life, is quite different.

What we mean by Holy Spirit is the active presence of God; the "energy of God" I have found to be a helpful metaphor. At creation, the Spirit of God hovered over the waters. The Spirit, the Holy Spirit, is the creative energy of God, the creative energy behind all that is. The word "spirit" comes from the Greek word "pneuma" and the Hebrew word "Ruach"—both of which may also be translated wind, or breath. So try out wind as the breath or Spirit of God if you like experiential, tangible metaphors. Or try Spirit as breath of God which God breathes into human beings bringing them to animation.

Like the wind which blows where it wills, the Holy Spirit shows up at unexpected times and places. And one thing more—in addition to creating, energizing, animating, the Holy Spirit changes: alters circumstances, transforms people. That has been the experience of God's people down through the centuries. And the event that typifies the experience is Pentecost.

It is one of our best stories. The disciples are still in Jerusalem a month and a half after the Passover—when Jesus was crucified and where they had those mysteriously powerful experiences of his presence which led them to conclude that he wasn't dead at all, but alive. Several of them had experienced it—and now they were waiting, still lying low, not wanting to draw attention to themselves, waiting more or less for something to happen. And on the day of Pentecost, the Festival of Weeks that celebrates the completion of the spring harvest, Jerusalem was once again filled with pilgrims from all over the world: Mesopotamia, Judea, Asia, Egypt, Libya. Suddenly, something happened; something uncanny, extraordinary, mysterious, one of those experiences that doesn't translate or explain well, an event you had to be there to get. In the telling of it years later, the writer, Luke, chooses extravagant language and images—rushing wind and tongues of fire. What happened, happened to the disciples. They were transformed. Suddenly they found their voices and

the courage to use them. Suddenly they could speak and be understood by all those people, speaking all those foreign languages. A careful reading of the account shows that the miracle of Pentecost is not the peculiar, extraordinary experience of speaking in tongues, but about its opposite: clarity, understanding. People could hear. They were listening. Communication happened.

Luke wants us to know that the whole world was there, with its marvelous diversity; racial, cultural, linguistic. And Luke wants us to know that in God's spirit, God's active, creative, generative, transforming presence, there is a power to transcend that diversity and create something new: a community—a community that speaks and listens and hears and understands—which is to say, communicate.

Peter Gomes, another of our generation's great preachers writes: "There is more to Pentecost than an ecstatic crowd engaged in esoterics and ecstasy. Indeed, the reality of Pentecost is more than these . . . the gift of Pentecost is the gift of understanding." (*Sermons,* p.99)

And then, given that Gomes is an African American, he makes a particularly powerful observation:

"The diversity we celebrate so frequently and loudly . . . has served to do little in the world but maintain the differences and erect a wall of ethnocentrism behind which we can hide and from which we can protect ourselves against others. At Pentecost, diversity was overcome by a power that transcended it, the power to understand, to hear in one's own language, one's own accent."

"Pentecost," Gomes observes, "did not reduce their identity, their particularity . . . They became more than they had been, for they became one with the larger community."

I pray for the day when my nation understands that about itself and its role in the family of nations, a day when our relationship with the United Nations, the only structure there is to express and nurture understanding and communication among nations, is based on something other than self-interest. I pray for the day that we will simply pay our dues. I pray for a day when we will listen, truly, to the voices of the rest of the world and begin to behave as if we understood. It was difficult recently to learn that the United States lost its seat on the UN Human Rights Commission and it caused an immediate and angry response: the House of Representatives voted to delay again our UN dues payment until and unless we are reinstated. A wiser response came from Professor Doug Cassel of the Center for Human Rights of Northwestern School of Law in a commentary on Chicago Public Radio.

The real reason that we lost the election, to France, Austria, Sweden, Professor Cassel pointed out, is the consistent refusal of the United States to act as a member of the human family and insistence on the right to act unilaterally, for instance, in our opposition to and refusal to endorse the International Criminal Court, the Land Mines Treaty, the

Convention on the Rights of the Child, all supported by Europe and opposed by us. And the death penalty. And our unilateral positions on the ABM treaty, the Kyoto protocol on the environment and global warming.

Professor Cassel concludes: "Washington must treat our allies and their policy makers with greater respect if we are to maintain our effectiveness in the world"

We believe that the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, is a power at work bringing the nations together. We believe that the life-giving energy of God is a power at work bringing the church together, no small task these days, working to create and nurture respect and listening and understanding and communication—between Catholics and Orthodox and Protestant Christians, and internally within the denominations where the shouting is the loudest and the anger deepest.

And personally—between individuals, the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, is a power at work to enable communication—communion—speaking and particularly hearing and listening.

Sometimes I think all the challenges of religion, all the theological controversies and moral quandaries, are all small compared to the challenge involved in personal, one on one communication.

A wise Presbyterian, the late Hugh T. Kerr, once said, "Our failure to communicate is not a failure of technique but will. We don't want to communicate. We'd rather shout one another down." And I thought of all the Christians who are gearing up to attend denominational General Assemblies and national conferences this summer, preparing for verbal battles over difficult issues: and I fantasized about a new Pentecost and the Holy Spirit descending and a loud voice from heaven saying, "Shut up and listen for a change."

It's epidemic, I believe. We don't listen because, as Hugh Kerr observed, we don't want to. You've experienced it, I'm sure. You're involved in a conversation with another person about a serious matter, you're speaking, expressing your thoughts, and you know your partner isn't listening, isn't hearing, is busy crafting his retort, his next argument. You've experienced it: you've tentatively shared a personal thought, an anxiety, a worry, a little concern about the surgery you're facing next week. And you haven't even gotten all of it out when your conversation partner goes you one better and tells you about a similar procedure she had, or one of her friends. She wasn't listening at all. A friend of mine says they are, "Well, I . . ." people: people who never let you finish your thought, but interrupt with, "Well, I . . ."

Sometimes in marriage, one or the other or both stop listening altogether and instead retreat into the isolation and loneliness and hell of silence.

One of the first things seminary students are taught in courses on pastoral care is to "shut up and listen;" to learn to resist the temptation to respond always with a story of our own, to tell a hospital patient about someone we know who had that operation and it was awful,

to learn the art of "active listening." Some learn it better than others, but people who practice it, clergy or laity, who listen intently, honor and care for and regard and love in a very effective way. They also become, I believe, instruments of God's Holy Spirit.

There is a poignant incident in the story of the first days of King Solomon's reign. Solomon was David's son. His father had consolidated military and political power in Jerusalem and won the loyal affection of his people. But now he was dead and young Solomon would need all the wisdom he could generate to handle the challenges of leadership he faced. And so he prayed: "Give your servant an understanding mind," which can also be translated: "Give your servant a listening heart." (1 Kings 3:3-9. See Alyce Mackenzie, "The Character of the Preacher," in *Journal for Preachers,* Pentecost 2001)

A listening heart. Communication between nations and between individuals: husband and wife, brother and sister, parent and child, lovers and friends and political opponents and acquaintances and colleagues at work . . . communication is a product of will—the result of a listening heart.

Our words can be weapons we use to injure one another. Pentecost came to heal divisions, to bring people together—into communication—communion.

When we listen actively, with our hearts, to one another, to the presence and voice of God, we give and receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit—understanding—communication—which is, in fact, Holy Communion.

Amen.